

A record of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus* from the Cape Verde Islands and status of the species in West Africa

by C. J. Hazevoet

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Hazevoet (1995) listed a record of two unidentified bee-eaters, "possibly Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops superciliosus*" [= *M. persicus*], at São Jorge dos Orgãos (15°03'N, 23°37'W), in the interior of Santiago island, Cape Verde Islands, 5 March 1985. This locality, at c. 400 m a.s.l., is one of the lush and relatively well vegetated areas on the island. There are river beds (which are dry at that time of year), arid hill slopes with sparse trees, agricultural fields, and extensive *Eucalyptus* plantations. The birds were observed in flight by members of a visiting party of birdwatchers. The record was communicated to CJH by observers who only saw the birds against the sun, basing their report on hearsay from other members of the party. Because insufficient details on identification were available, the record was considered unconfirmed. Recently, field notes made by other observers, who had the opportunity to view the birds well, have been brought to light and these confirm that the birds were indeed *M. persicus*. Identification was based on the very long central tail spike, very obvious copper underwings, deep green underparts and different facial pattern from the European Bee-eater *M. apiaster*. There are no previous records of the Blue-cheeked Bee-eater from the Cape Verde Islands (Hazevoet 1995).

In Africa, west of 20°E and north of the Equator, the Blue-cheeked Bee-eater breeds in the Maghreb and discontinuously across the Sahel zone from southwestern Mauritania and northwestern Senegal east to the Chad basin, with occasional breeding occurring further south (Heim de Balsac & Mayaud 1962, Fry 1984, Fry *et al.* 1988, Lamarche 1988, Morel & Morel 1990). Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters from Northwest Africa are thought to winter in mesic West African savanna, probably entirely south of 15°N, from Senegambia east to the shores of Lake Chad (Fry 1984, Fry *et al.* 1988). Birds from Northwest and West Africa are known as subspecies *chrysocercus* Cabanis and Heine, 1860, the type locality of which is Senegal.

The Northwest African population is reputedly small, viz. Morocco: local, perhaps 40–60 pairs; Algeria: probably nowhere common (Cramp 1985). The Algerian population, however, appears to be larger than the Moroccan, i.e. it probably consists of several hundreds of pairs (cf. Ledant *et al.* 1981, Mayaud 1985). The alleged breeding in Tunisia and western Libya (Etchécopar & Hüb 1964) has never been substantiated (Bundy 1967, Thomsen & Jacobsen 1979, Cramp 1985). Northwest African birds vacate their breeding grounds in Morocco and Algeria from late July to September and return in late March and, mainly, April (Heim de Balsac & Mayaud 1962, Smith 1968).

Little is known about movements of West African breeding birds, which are hard to follow due to the impossibility of distinguishing between these and visiting migrants from the north. Fry (1984) stated that the southern Saharan population probably moves south in autumn, but according to Lamarche (1988) the species is absent in Mauritania only from January to March, with most birds (presumably local breeders) arriving in May. Non-breeding Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters are particularly common near coasts from The Gambia to Sierra Leone, October–April (Fry *et al.* 1988), but in The Gambia they have been recorded in all months (Gore 1990) and in the Casamance area, southwestern Senegal, they were only absent in August–September (Sala 1983). They were abundant in coastal Guinea-Bissau during December–February, particularly in mangrove swamps, with densities of up to 19 birds/10 ha and roosts of up to 520 birds (Altenburg & van Spanje 1989, Altenburg & van der Kamp 1992). There is also a Guinea-Bissau record of a bird collected in June (Frade & Bacelar 1955).

The Cape Verde record seems to fit well with the known pattern of northward spring migration in westernmost Africa, and the birds may be assumed to have been migrants from the north. However, if the population estimates of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater in Northwest Africa (as quoted above) are within any range of credibility, northern migrants can hardly account for the occasionally abundant occurrence in West Africa. The explanation of this discrepancy may be twofold. Firstly, the Northwest African population may be considerably larger than currently known, and/or the species is more common and widespread as a breeding bird in West Africa. In particular, the breeding population in Mauritania and Senegal may be considerably larger than known at present. Lamarche (1988) reported roosts of up to 1500 presumably locally breeding birds at Nouakchott, Mauritania. A good proportion of the birds wintering in coastal West Africa may originate from Mauritania and Senegal rather than Northwest Africa. A second possibility explaining the species' abundance during the northern winter may be that considerable numbers of Asian breeding birds (*ssp. persicus*) winter in West Africa, but so far have not been recognised as such. This has been suggested earlier by Elgood (1981). If this were indeed the case, this would presumably apply to the eastern parts of West Africa rather than the west. In view of the above, it seems equally possible that the Cape Verde birds were stragglers from West Africa or migrants from Northwest Africa.

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A new site for, and observations on *Serinus flavigula* in Ethiopia, with comments on its taxonomic status

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At 16.30 h on 18 September 1993 we were negotiating the rocky track to the north side of the crater rim of Fantalle Mountain (9°00'N, 39°54'E) in the Awash National Park of Ethiopia searching for *Serinus* species. A party of six or seven small finches flew from the top of a roadside acacia, crossed the road and settled on low plants of *Lavandula coronopifolia* on the edge of a gully with low sparse acacia trees, 80 m away. The birds looked slim and very pale with striking, extensive bright yellow rumps. Although not particularly shy, they were extremely restless, moving from plant to plant over an area of about 500 m². We were able to watch them down to 7 m for ten minutes and took detailed descriptions. The site is at 1410 m altitude.